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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT PERMITS NGO HUMAN RIGHTS MARCH

11. (U) Summary. In a step forward for Cambodia on freedom of assembly, on December 7, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sar Kheng gave a local human rights group, Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC), permission to organize a human rights march and rally in Phnom Penh on December 10. Organizers expect 5,000 participants to turn out in honor of International Human Rights Day, celebrated as a national holiday in Cambodia. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On December 7, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sar Kheng granted local human rights group Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC) permission to organize a human rights march and rally in Phnom Penh on December 10. CHRAC originally applied for the permission through the Phnom Penh Municipality per the Cambodian 1991 Law on Demonstrations. CHRAC had requested that a two-mile-long march be allowed through many of the main streets of Phnom Penh during the morning rush hour. The march was to convene for a rally at Wat Phnom in the central area of the city. (Note: Coincidentally, close to the U.S. Embassy. End note.) The municipality bumped the request up to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) recommending the MOI deny the request based on public order and security concerns, two grounds for denial mentioned in the law. CHRAC told poloff that, in a meeting with the municipality, the organizers stated they were flexible on the location, and were willing to drop the march part of the event. However, they were adamant that the rally be allowed to take place in a public, non-enclosed space, going so far as to threaten to boycott official celebrations of the day if permission was not granted.

13. (SBU) Early in the day on December 6, the MOI's initial response was to allow the rally but at the enclosed Olympic Stadium. Later that day, the Ambassador handed a letter to Sar Kheng stating that Human Rights Day is an opportunity for Cambodia to show its progress as an increasingly open society. He encouraged the RGC to transparently engage with CHRAC to find a way for the event to proceed while respecting valid logistical concerns. The next morning, CHRAC met with the municipality and was told that a smaller march than was originally proposed could proceed with a rally following at Wat Phnom. For the previous two years, Human Rights Day rallies without marches have occurred inside the Olympic Stadium.

14. (U) Comment. Two years ago, banners flown during a Human Rights Day rally set off a chain of negative political steps. Last year, the government allowed only a rally in an enclosed, and tightly policed, space. This year's agreement to allow the march and outdoor rally are a step forward for Cambodia on freedom of assembly. Freedom of assembly has consistently been noted in past years' Human Rights Reports as not respected in practice, and most human rights observers would have agreed with this statement. For example, the 2006 Freedom House Countries at the Crossroads report states, "The

government has frequently refused to authorize demonstrations...". More steps are necessary -- including greater transparency on the processes by which the RGC reviews requests for peaceful demonstrations. However, the RGC's response in this case is encouraging. End comment.  
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